

Media, PA — Mental health and substance abuse disabilities affect more than one quarter of the U.S. population, and have an untold impact on the families, colleagues, and friends of those in need of treatment. And as our soldiers fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan are exposed to repeat deployments, extended engagements and prolonged exposure to hostile threats, our returning veterans need unprecedented support in these areas.

— To spotlight the ever-growing need for mental health and addition equity, Congressman Joe Sestak (PA-07) toured the Mirmont Treatment Center in Lima, Pa., on Monday, October 22. The center was originally created to offer inpatient treatment for alcoholism, but today provides comprehensive inpatient and outpatient services for people seeking help for chemical dependency, many of whom suffer from a co-occurring psychiatric disorder.

“Issues related to mental health and addiction are not just challenges faced by individuals, they are challenges faced by our country as a whole,” said Congressman Sestak. “Mental illness, including substance abuse, is a leading disability in our nation, with one in four Americans afflicted by these disabilities. Gone untreated, they cost our economy over \$150 billion a year.

“Our district is blessed with numerous facilities like Mirmont, Elwyn, Eagleville, Don Guanella, and the Easter Seals School, that are dedicated to the treatment and welfare of those individuals affected by these disabilities,” added the Congressman.

Congressman Sestak is at the forefront of legislation seeking to provide equity to those dealing with behavioral and mental health disabilities, and has visited numerous facilities and organizations in and around the district that are dedicated to treating those individuals who are affected. Monday’s tour of Mirmont was part of the Congressman’s plan to visit all local behavioral and mental health organizations in order to best represent the interests of patients and their caregivers through legislation that brings equity to the treatment of mental illness and substance abuse.

To that end, Congressman Sestak recently partnered with Congressman Kennedy (D-RI) to push for the passage of H.R.1424, the Paul Wellstone Mental Health and Addiction Equity Act, which expands the Mental Health Parity Act of 1996 to require group health plans that offer benefits for mental health and addiction to do so on the same terms as care for other diseases. The legislation was successfully passed out of the Education and Labor Committee, of which Congressman Sestak is a member, and is awaiting a vote on the House floor.

Earlier this year, Congressman Sestak called attention to the mental health disabilities that affect the men and women in the United States Armed Services by offering two pieces of legislation that address the issue. Congressman Sestak partnered with Congressman Kennedy and successfully offered two amendments to H.R. 1538, the Wounded Warrior Assistance Act, that were passed with unanimous consent. The first amendment clarifies that “medical care,” as discussed in H.R. 1538, encompasses mental health care. The second amendment requires the Secretary of the Department of Defense to develop a plan to help prevent PTSD and other stress-related psychopathologies (including substance abuse conditions) from developing in our military service members.

Research has shown that 17 percent of service members returning from the war in Iraq have experience depression, anxiety, or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Furthermore, less than 40 percent of those affected received mental health care treatment.

“Left untreated, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder can ultimately lead to other problems, including drug and alcohol abuse,” said Congressman Sestak earlier this year. “We can no longer afford to look at physical care and mental health care as two separate entities – with physical care as ‘legitimate’ and ‘mental health care’ as something less than that, and my amendments bring a much-needed spotlight on the problem.”

Born and raised in Delaware County, former 3-star Admiral Joe Sestak served in the Navy for 31 years and now serves as the Representative from the 7th District of Pennsylvania. He led a series of operational commands at sea, including Commander of an aircraft carrier battle group of 30 U.S. and allied ships with over 15,000 sailors and 100 aircraft that conducted operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. After 9/11, Joe was the first Director of "DeepBlue," the Navy's anti-terrorism unit that established strategic and operations policies for the "Global War on Terrorism." He served as President Clinton's Director for Defense Policy at the National Security Council in the White House, and holds a Ph.D. in Political Economy and Government from Harvard University. According to the office of the House Historian, Joe is the highest-ranking former military officer ever elected to the U.S. House of Representatives.